MICRONET 800 (C) 80040187a 0p

XuRAY Feature

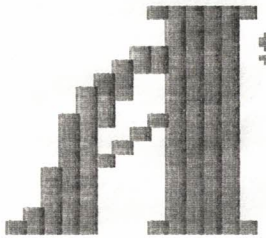
FROM RUSSIA WITH WIFE

When Andrew Kilgore went to Moscow as a student, marriage was the last thing on his mind.

GOTO #

Index: 3 Write: 5 Browse: 8

XTRA! Feature



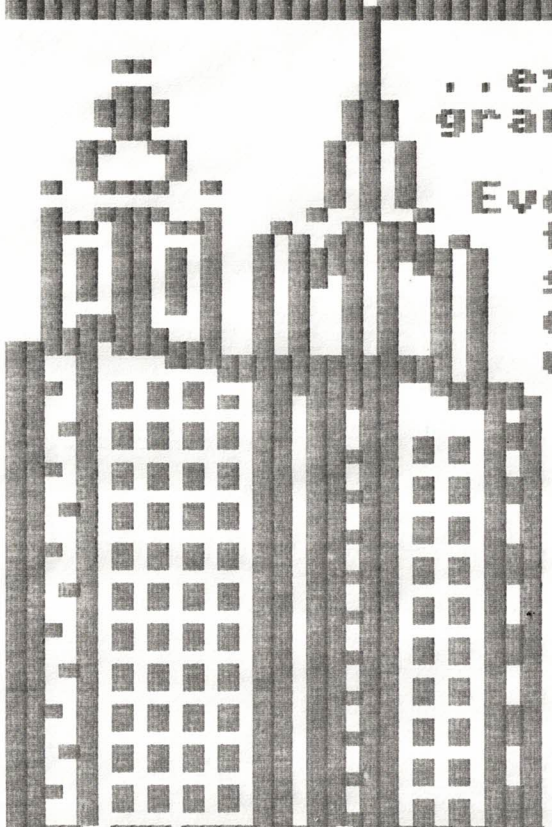
S THE bus drove up to the huge building along massively wide roads, I felt for a moment like Gulliver arriving in the land of the Brobdingnagians.

Everything is on a gargantuan scale in Moscow, the skyline dominated by the "wedding cake" architecture of the Stalin period and the tower blocks of Krushchev's time, the streets as wide as valleys.

My home for a year, Moscow State University, brooding on the Lenin Hills, is perhaps the best architectural...

more... #

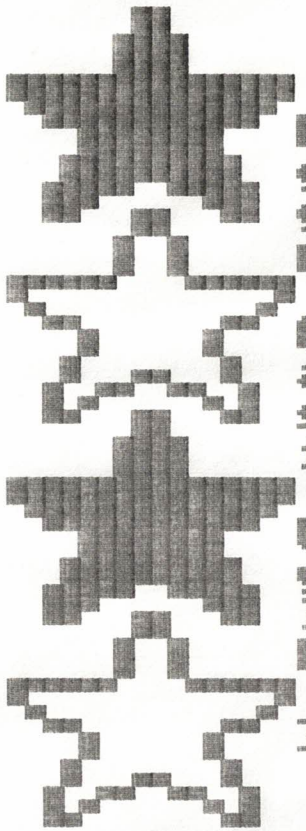
Index: 3 Write: 5 Browse: 8



..example of Stalin's grand vision of the future.

Everything is huge except the people: small silver-teethed bureaucrats who bark at you whenever you need to go through a gate that requires a pass (which is often) or whenever you need to approach the pervasive bureaucracy for any of the many pieces of paper you need to live in the Soviet Union.

more... #

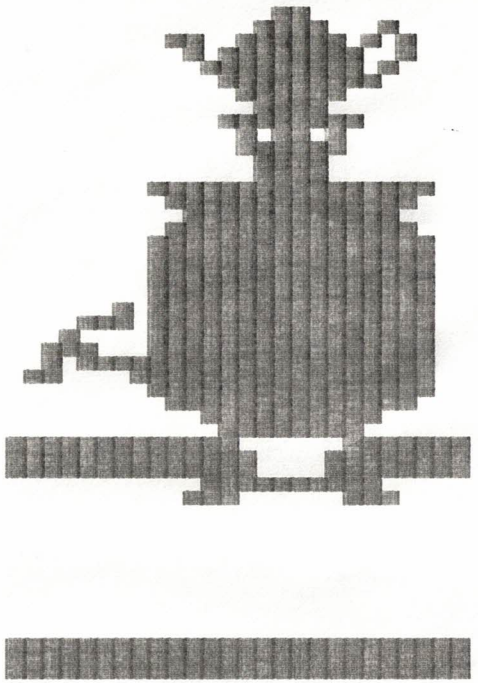


Especially formidable are the babushki (grannies) who belligerantly thrust their round girths at you and demand your papers.

And thus, a few years ago, I arrived at the university to study Russian. And what a stay it was!

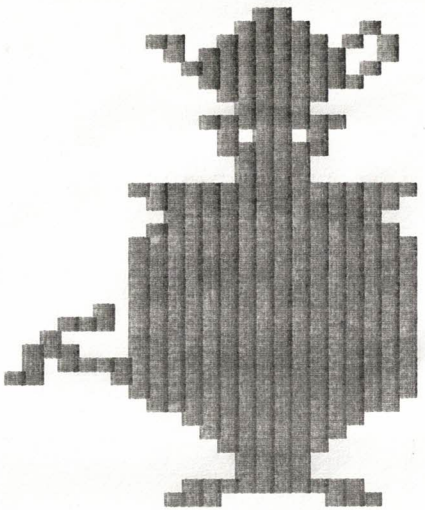
Unless you lock yourself in your room it's impossible to live long in Moscow without being swept into a whirl of social activity. Within weeks I was spending my whole time...

more... #



..time rushing from one small social gathering to another.

From an exciting political discussion to the opera; from an argument in the Lenin Library to a long queue waiting to see the latest Tarkovsky film; from a guided tour of the Kremlin to a "writers' village" miles out of Moscow to have a meal with a well-known, slightly suspect, Russian novelist. The latter...



..was an "illicit" trip since foreigners are not allowed to travel out of Moscow without permission. (The same restriction applies to Soviet visitors to London - XTRA Ed)

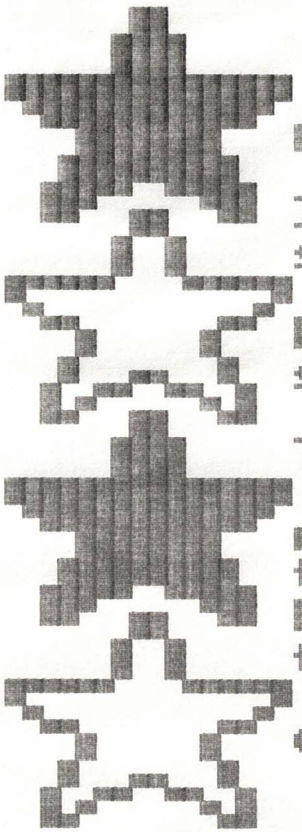
And then, the next day, to Peredelkino (the most famous writers' village) to meet Boris Pasternak's son. A week later I had the chance to visit the dissident, Medvedev, in his book-lined flat.

What a social whirl! Hardly any time...

..to sleep. Only the vodka to keep me going.

After being in Moscow a month, a real adventure began. The day before I'd been having tea with some French students. Among them was a young Russian girl whom I'd hardly noticed.

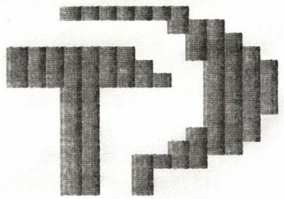
Arriving home late, my head swimming, I found a note under my door. It was from the girl, Svetlana, offering me any sum I cared to mention in the currency of my choice, if I would agree to a "white" marriage...



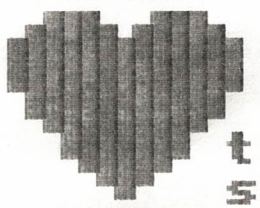
..with her. There was her phone number...nothing else.

It turned out that she, her sister and her mother wanted to leave the Soviet Union and had been trying to do so, without success, for several years.

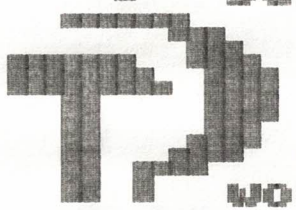
They had been refused, partly because such wishes are often refused but mainly because there had been a scandal in France when the mother had fallen in love with a Frenchman and embarrassed the Soviets, especially because her...



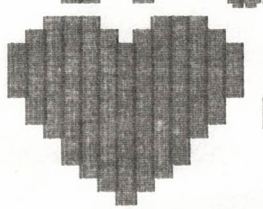
..husband was a KGB man attached to the Soviet Embassy in Paris.



They had been rushed back to Moscow in disgrace where Svetlana's father had disowned them and disappeared in order to save his own career.



His family had been living precariously ever since — the mother denied permission to work and the family dependent on friends for money.



By marrying a foreigner...

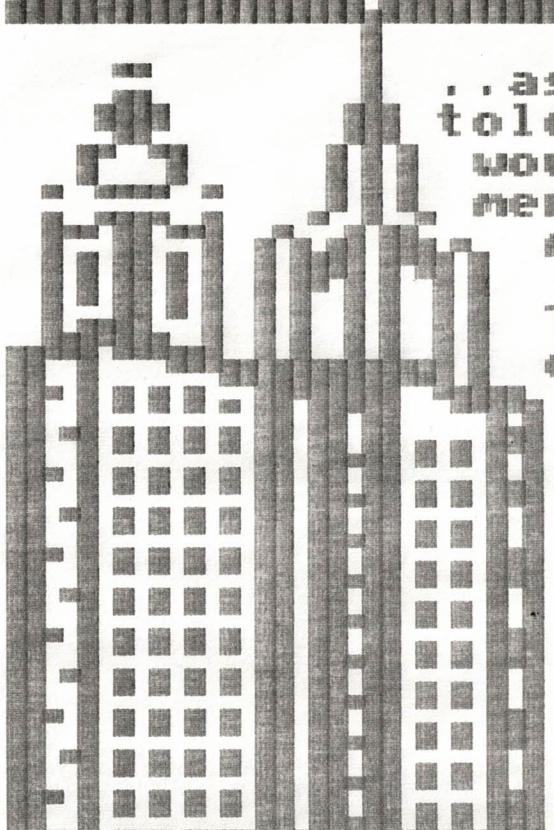
..Svetlana hoped to apply pressure on the authorities to help the family leave. White marriages, as they are called, are often undertaken in the Soviet Union.

Always an impetuous man, I phoned the next day to arrange a meeting. Svetlana took me back to the family flat to meet her mother.

In whispered conversations held in the bathroom (yes, their flat was bugged) I agreed to marry Svetlana in order to...

MICRONET 800 (C) 80040187k 0p

XURIL feature



..assist them to leave. I told them, further, that I would do it without payment — who was I to take money for such a thing?

The next six months were chaotic, bemusing and thoroughly educational.

WILL ANDREW AND SVETLANA GET AWAY WITH IT?

FIND OUT: GOTO 2

Index: 3 Write: 5 Browse: 8

MICRONET 800 (C) 80040181a 0p

XtRA! Feature

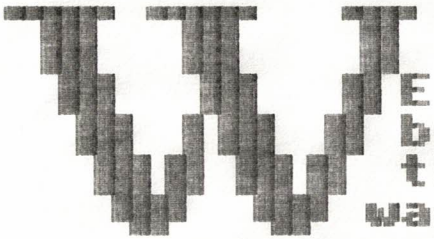
FROM RUSSIA WITH WIFE

Part Two of Andrew Kilgore's Moscow adventure. GOTO 2 if you missed Part One

GOTO #

Index: 3 Write: 5 Browse: 8

XTRA! Feature



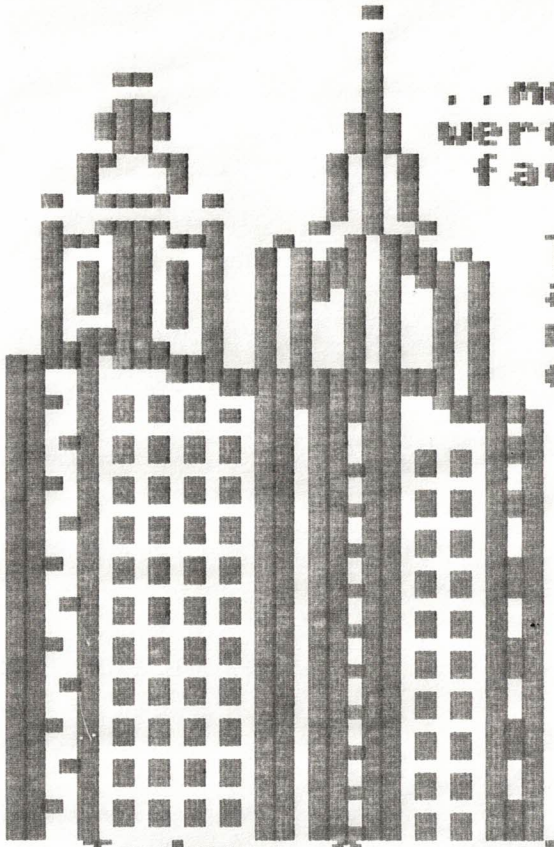
E HAVE all heard tales of bribery and corruption in the Soviet Union, but this was like an Eastern bazaar!

At every step of the way stood a little bureaucrat who needed bribing to push us a little further on the road to getting married.

We arrived at the office where we initially had to register with large bunches of flowers. What's more, we had to find out before, through the grape-vine, what the woman's name was (yes...

more... #

Index: 3 Write: 5 Browse: 8

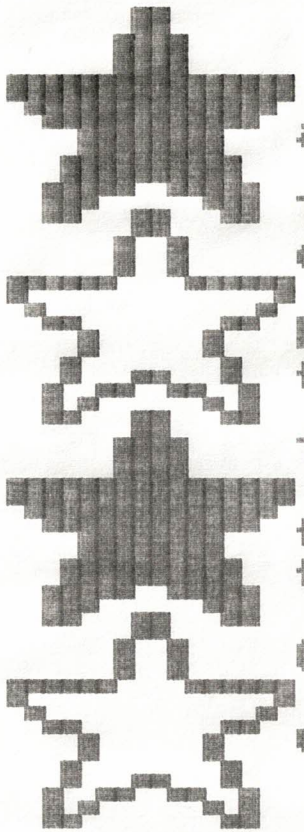


..most of the bureaucrats were women) and what her favourite flowers were.

The week after we had to attend before a different woman, the director of the Palace of Weddings, this time with her favourite foreign perfume (bought in a dollar shop).

Our conversations with these people were so very polite but loaded with double meanings...

more... #

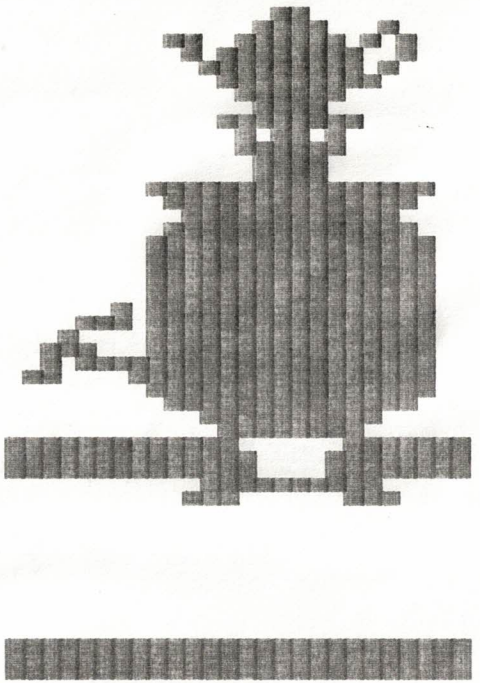


..and prevarication: we were always being "tried".

Thus, told to attend with certain papers, we would arrive and queue for three or four hours only to be told that a further paper was required.

The next day we would return with that extra paper to find that the office was closed — they had forgotten to tell us!

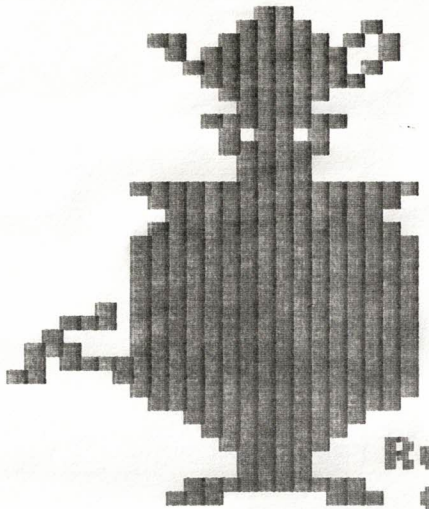
Gradually, however, we wore them down. Having queued for what seemed to be months...



..we finally had a date set for us. Just in time, as my visa was soon due to run out.

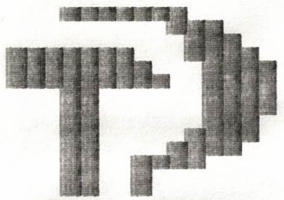
The strange this is that I'm sure they could have delayed us long enough to ensure my visa ran out but they didn't. Why? Perhaps they wanted to extract as much agony for us and fun (and goodies) for themselves before conceding.

I prefer, however, to...

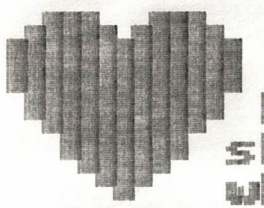


..think, less cynically, that perhaps, in the recesses of their large bosoms, these women did feel some compassion. Russians are much more complex than they are given credit for.

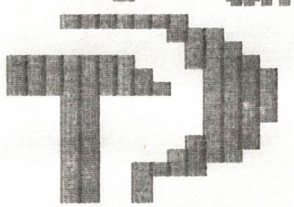
Rules are for breaking and compassion is always a good reason for breaking them - and everyone gets involved. For example, after I'd been in Moscow for several months I realised that you never believe anybody the first time. I remember going out to buy some food. The sign on the food...



..stall said Closed but the babushka was still there, counting the takings.



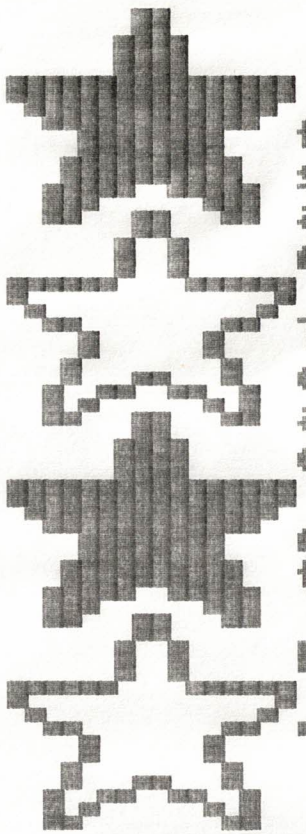
I asked for some sausages. "Closed", she said. "But I'm hungry", I replied. "Closed", she said. At this point I did what any self-respecting Russian would do: I turned to a passing woman and said to her, "How can I eat? This woman won't sell me any food."



When I had collected a group of Russians and we all complained heartily that it was...

more... #

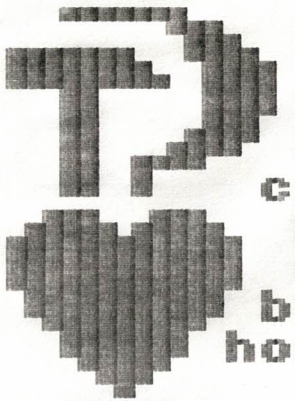
Index: 3 Write: 5 Browse: 8



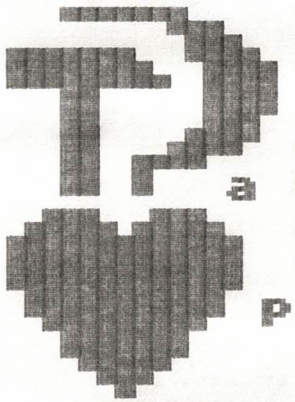
.."inhuman" not to sell me food, the woman gave up, shrugged her shoulders and asked "What do you want, young man?".

Then there's the schizophrenia of saying one thing and doing another. It certainly seemed clear that everyone knew the true nature of Svetlana's and my intentions, but nobody talked directly about it.

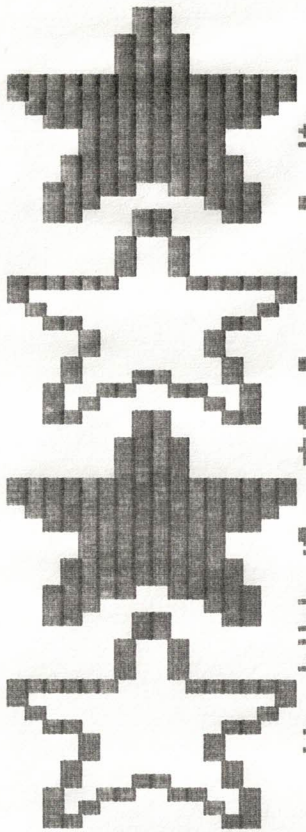
Nobody ever said "Is this a ficticious relationship?". Or, "If you want to succeed you...



..must bribe me". But that is how life is led in the Soviet Union. The whole of existence centres around dealing with the bureaucracy — getting what you can from it through bribery, but always pretending to lead an honest, incorruptible life.



The marriage at the Palace of Weddings was the most bizarre occasion. As we approached the doors they were flung open and a video camera homed in on us, remaining fixed on us through the entire ceremony. When we paid afterwards I noticed a...



..charge for film, which surprised me.

"Why", I asked Svetlana, "did you order a photographer and video camera?"

"I didn't", she replied, "that was the KGB." Good grief, I thought, filming you is one thing but actually charging you for it is pure Monty Python

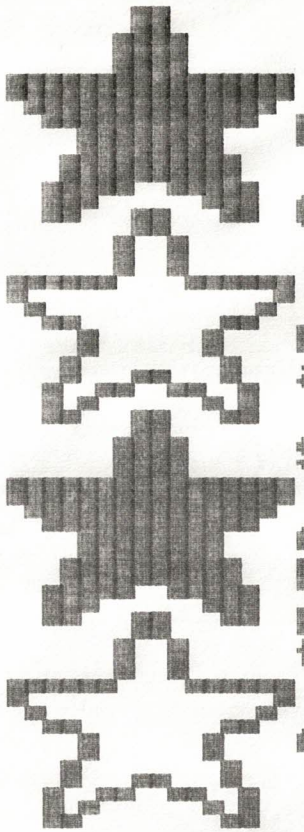
It was only at that point that I really took seriously the degree to which I had been of interest to the KGB. After...

..the wedding meal I was talking to Svetlana's uncle who has, over the years, been questioned by the KGB many times.

He related to me how, at the precise moment we arrived at the Palace of Weddings, he had again been pulled in and questioned.

"What sort of fellow is this Englishman?" he was asked. "Well", he said, "the man seems pleasant enough; he seems to have a nice smart suit!"

Two days later my visa ran...



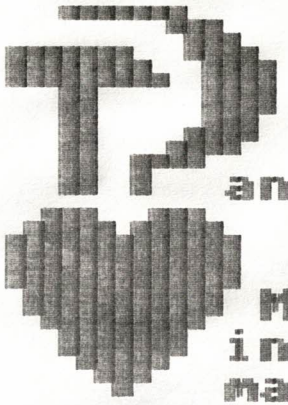
..out and I left Moscow on the East-West Express.

Of course, Svetlana could not come with me as she had to go through the bureaucratic process of applying to leave - and that's another long story!

Suffice it to say that, some six months later, after my mother-in-law had gone on hunger strike and the family's plight had become an issue in the French newspapers, all three finally left. Svetlana's mother now lives in the...

more... #

Index: 3 W



..Camerouns, Svetlana is working as an artist in Paris (getting very good reviews too) and her sister is currently in Cambridge learning English.

My only regret is that my time in Moscow was far too short and I may never get a visa to revisit a country which fascinates me. Talk about the people - they are amazing. And the more I think about it, the more I realise that, small as they may be in stature, the Russians are as massive in all other ways as the buildings of Moscow.

There is a complexity about them that only a Dostoyevsky can hope to depict.